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THE GARDEN CALENDAR

A radio discussion by W. R. Beattie, Bureau of Plant Industry, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast over the NBC network, Wednesday, May 12, 1937.

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Hello folks. Today I want to tell you about the creation of new and made-to-order varieties of strawberries. In the early days of horticultural development the origin of a new variety of fruit was largely a matter of chance, of the accidental crossing of varieties resulting in what was termed "chance seedlings." Occasionally these chance seedlings proved to be as good or better than either of their parents. Modern science has taken much of the element of chance out of the work of the plant breeder so that now we may have planned procedure in the creation of new varieties.

A notable example is found in the development of a number of new varieties of the strawberry. For many years the Howard 17, often called Premier, the Crescent, Missionary, Dunlap, Chesapeake, Joe or Big Joe, Parsons, Belt or William Belt were the leading varieties. These varieties proved fairly satisfactory for ordinary marketing and home use but the manufacturers of fruit preserves came along with a request for a strawberry having firm flesh, tart flavor, deep red color of the flesh, good jell qualities and other qualities suitable for making high grade strawberry jam and marmalade. None of the old varieties quite measured up to these requirements so a couple of our men in the Horticultural Division were given the job of creating a new variety that would meet the requirements of the preserving industry.

This work was started in 1923 and a number of crosses were made including several between Missionary and Howard 17. This work was done at what was then the United States Plant Field Station at Glen Dale, Maryland about 14 miles from Washington. Later the work was transferred to our new horticultural farm near Beltsville, Maryland.

The hundreds and hundreds of little seedlings that resulted from these crosses were all planted out during the fall of 1923 but it took until 1925 before any tangible results were obtained. It happened that seedling number 659 was outstanding from the standpoint of a preserving berry and it was given the name Blakemore in honor of Marcus Blakemore, the first president of the National Preservers' Association. By 1927 enough plants had been grown so that it could be sent out for trial in a few selected localities. Owing to the fact that Missionary was one of its parents it was first tried at Willard, North Carolina and from there was extended to all parts of the south, except Florida where the Klondike has been the leading variety. It was during the fruiting season of 1927, in comparison with many other seedlings and named varieties in the field

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plots of the Glen Dale Field Station, it was picked out by the head of the research laboratories of the National Preservers Association and after thorough tests in the laboratories was selected as the most satisfactory variety for preserving and as superior to all known commercial varieties. Since that time the Blakemore has not only become the most important preserving strawberry but one of the best commercial market varieties, especially in the Southern and Western States.

Perhaps some of you would like to know what became of all of the other seedlings that resulted from these crosses. Well, they were all grown to the fruiting stage and tested, most of them discarded, but a large number were retained for further test. Out of these crosses and others made about that time we now have the Blakemore, the Dorsett, the Fairfax, Narcissa, Bellmar, Southland, and Redheart and still others that have not yet been named and are still carried under their numbers. The work of making new crosses is still going on we think we now have other hybrids that may prove even superior to the Blakemore as a preserving berry.

Few people realize what is involved in the creation of a new or distinct variety of plant. The men who are doing this work, and women too, for some of our best plant breeding work is being done by women, are untiring in their efforts. Frequently they are in the fields at dawn in order to watch the blossoms for the exact time at which to transfer the pollen from one flower to another. Often they are working in the berry patches and orchards long after their fellow workers have gone to their homes. At the hottest part of the day you may find them out in the gardens watching the development of some particular plant child that gives promise of special disease resistance or other qualities that make it superior to its parents. All of this is shared with the workers in the State Colleges and Experiment Stations to the end that you may have better fruit in your garden and on your tables and the next time that you see an especially fine box of strawberries remember that back of it lies the diligent work of somebody who had an ideal and made it come true.

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